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ABSTRACT

Henri Matisse painted "Open Window, Collioure" in the summer of 1905, when he and Andre Derain worked together in Collioure (France), a small Mediterranean fishing port near the Spanish border. This teaching guide discusses the painting "Open Window, Collioure" and Matisse's use of light and vibrant color. The guide provides information on Matisse's life and on fauvism. Includes an image of "Open Window, Collioure." Presents several classroom activities. Contains 5 resources. (BT)

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Henri Matisse: Color and Light

A Guide for Teachers

Henri Matisse, Open Window, Collioure, 1905

F.P. Smith

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Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Carla Brenner, Coordinator of Interpretive Materials, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
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Henri Matisse: Color and Light

When I put a green, it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky.
--Henri Matisse

Henri Matisse painted Open Window, Collioure in the summer of 1905, when he and André Derain worked together in the small Mediterranean fishing port of Collioure, near the Spanish border.

The scene is filled with light, vibrant, and inviting. The vermillion masts of blue-hulled boats float on pink waves below a sky banded with turquoise, pink, and periwinkle. Reflected in the glass of the open window, the scene becomes rectangular blocks of bright green, watery cyclamen, and lilac, and the walls framing the view are violet and turquoise. These are hardly the colors of nature--and they provoked an outrage when Matisse exhibited Open Window, Collioure later in the year at the Salon d'Automne in Paris.

Eyewitness accounts tell of laughter emanating from room VII, where audiences saw this painting and similar works by Matisse, André Derain, their friend Maurice de Vlaminck, and others. Gertrude Stein reported that people scratched at the canvases in derision, and a critic, noting the presence of a Renaissance-style statuette in the center of the room, quipped "Tiens, Donatello chez les fauves" (Well, well, Donatello among the wild beasts). Soon, these artists were being called the fauves, and room VII le cage. It was one of the first places where the world got a glimpse of what art would be in the twentieth century.

The fauves liberated color from any requirements other than those posed by the painting itself. "When I put a green," Matisse would later say, "it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky." He was painting pictures, not things. Color was a tool of the painter's artistic intention and expression, no longer limited by the imitation of nature.

Though he was inspired by what he saw around him, for Matisse the imperative was to "interpret nature and submit it to the spirit of the picture." Derain later called the fauves' color "sticks of dynamite," but the serious and hard-working Matisse was an unlikely revolutionary. It was something of an accident that he became an artist at all. Growing up in the bleak, industrial regions of northern France, he had showed no talent--or even interest--in painting.

In 1887 he was sent by his father to study law in Paris. Working diligently he completed his certificate in a year and returned home to a job copying legal documents. It took a case of appendicitis in 1890 to turn Matisse into an artist. After his mother gave him a box of paints during his long convalescence, he recalled sixty years later, "it was as if I had been called. Henceforth, I did not lead my life. It led me."

In 1892 he announced his intention to make his career as a painter and returned to Paris, this time to study painting. Before long he found a congenial atmosphere at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where Gustave Moreau gave students the freedom to discover their own artistic personalities. "Think your color," Moreau told Matisse. "Know how to imagine it."

A New Look at Color

Already in the late 1880s, a number of painters dissatisfied with impressionism's reliance on purely sensory effects had begun to use color in new ways. They wanted to paint with the intellect and the emotions as well as the eye. Georges Seurat and the neo-impressionists applied color systematically, according to current theories about optics (see below). Vincent van Gogh, seeking greater expressive power, used color in a manner he described as "arbitrary." And Paul Gauguin looked at color symbolically, massing it into large flat areas and advising other painters, "don't copy nature too literally." All three of them influenced Matisse's evolving approach to color.

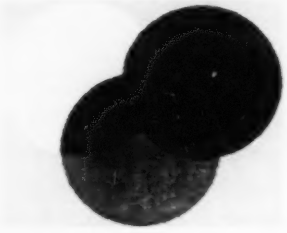
When he first arrived in Collioure in 1905, Matisse had been working in the neo-impressionist manner of Seurat, experimenting with small touches of pure pigment in a regular arrangement. He found the technique limiting, however, and did not like the way the brilliance of the individual colors blended in the eye to make more muted tones. Later he recalled his own goals at this time: "Construction by colored surfaces. Search for intensity of color, subject matter being unimportant. Reaction against the diffusion of local tone in light. Light...expressed by a harmony of intensely colored surfaces." Earlier in the year, Matisse had been a committee chairman helping to mount a retrospective exhibition of paintings by Van Gogh, and he acknowledged that the influence of Van Gogh had "encouraged him to strive for a freer, more spontaneous technique, for more intense, more expressive harmonies." In the broad areas of opposed color in Gauguin's paintings--and many of these, as it happened, had gone to collectors in Collioure after Gauguin's death--he saw a way to maintain intensity and amplify the effect of light. Matisse's view through a window is almost like a painting within a painting--and he has applied his colors differently in the two areas. In the interior, colors are brushed on in large blocks or wide sweeps of color, while the outside world is painted with short wavy lines or staccato brushstrokes, not unlike the studies of neo-impressionists painters. The contrast contributes a sense of space.

Color and Light

Seurat and the neo-impressionists applied contemporary theories about optics and color in a rigorous way. They were influenced, in part, by observations published in the mid-nineteenth century by Michel Eugène Chevreul, who had been a chemist at the Gobelins tapestry factory. His attempt to understand why some colors seemed unexpectedly dull resulted in the law of "simultaneous contrast." This suggested that colors appear most intense when juxtaposed with their complements: green next to red, for example, yellow next to violet, or orange next to blue.

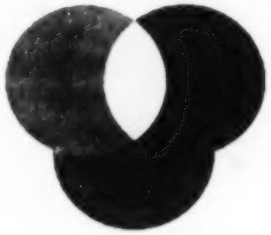
Notice how Matisse employs complements in Open Window, Collioure. The boats have orange-red masts over blue hulls. The plants on the balcony pair red blossoms with green leaves. The reflections oppose turquoise and pink, and even the walls are higher concentrations of the same complementary pair.

Isolated by the bare areas of the canvas, these combinations generate a sort of visual vibrato. In the 1850s, physicist James Clerk Maxwell had demonstrated that colors could be combined in the eye, blending almost as if they had been mixed on a palette. By spinning disks of violet and green, for example, he produced the sensation of blue. Ogden Rood, an American painter and theoretician, went further, suggesting that the same optical mixing occurred when dots of pigment were placed close to each other. Based on the work of Chevreul and Rood, Seurat arrived at his "pointillist" technique.

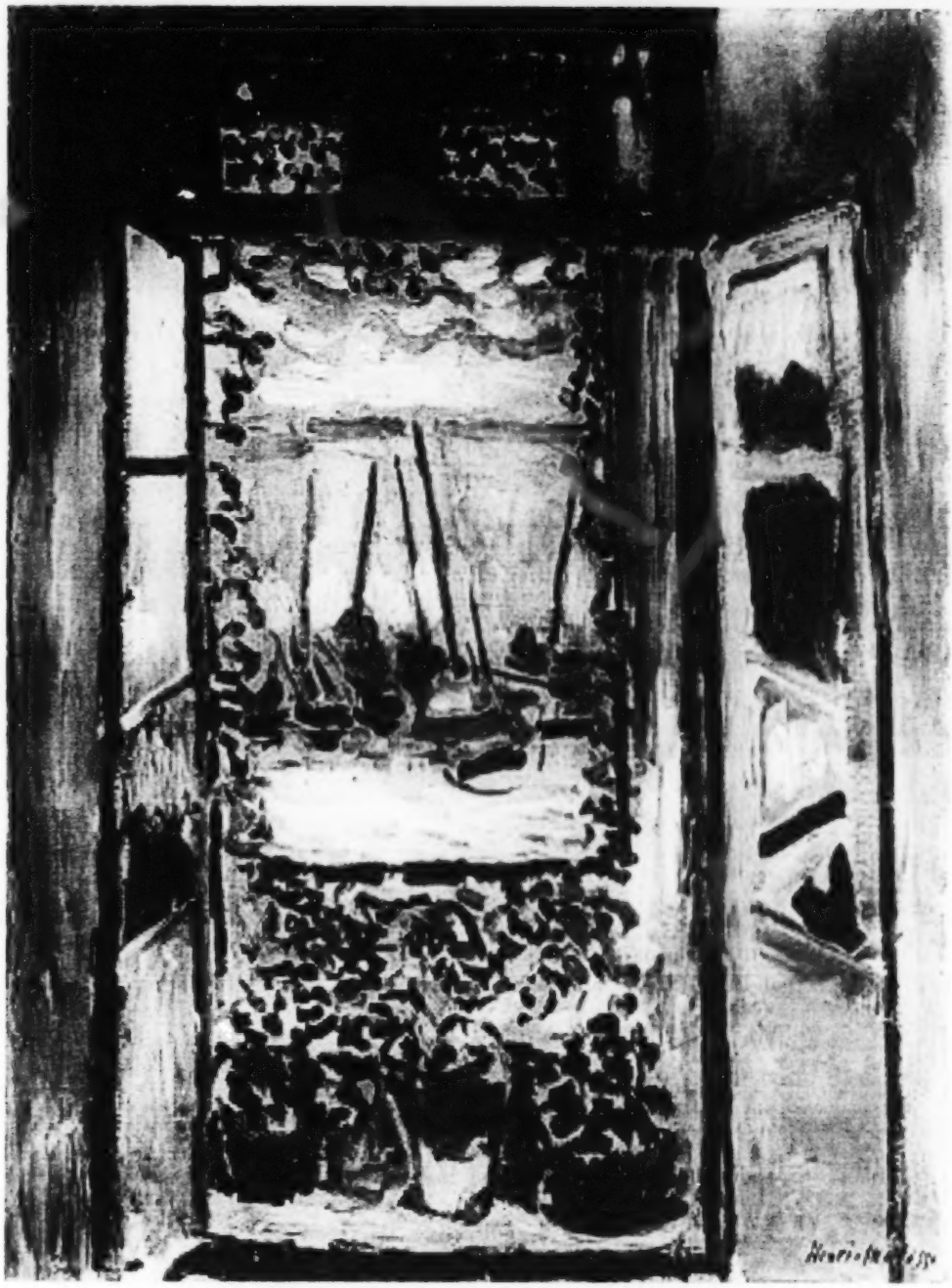


All of the color on a printed page can be produced with the three pigment primaries, red, blue, and yellow (or more properly magenta, cyan, and yellow). These are also called the subtractive primaries because together they make black (or nearly so as in the image on the left).

Combined in pairs, they yield another set of primaries, the additive, or light, primaries. These are the wavelengths of orange-red, blue-violet, and green that combine to make white light (image on right). This is how the color on your computer monitor behaves. When these colors are all combined in pairs they form cyan, magenta, and yellow. That light is composed of color--that, in a way, color is light, is energy--is what Newton's famous demonstration with the prism proved.



Matisse's use of the additive primaries enhances the effect of light in his painting: notice the extent to which the entire composition is based on red, blue, and green in various forms.



Henri Matisse Open Window, Collioure, 1905
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney
1998.74.7

Henri Matisse: Color and Light

ACTIVITIES

Have students trace Open Window, Collioure and color it using different color schemes. (Alternately, they could sketch the painting as a line drawing and then color their sketch.) What if Matisse had used the subtractive primaries instead of the light ones. How would this red-yellow-blue scheme effect the mood of the painting?

Matisse's teacher Gustave Moreau made what many people have called a "prophetic" statement to his pupil Matisse, when he told him "You were born to simplify painting." Have students research the course of Matisse's career, reporting to what extent and in what ways they find this to be true.

Arrange a tour and discussion with a commercial printer in your area about the problems encountered in color printing.

Resources

Freeman, Judi, The Fauve Landscape. New York: Abbeville Press, 1990.

For Matisse's entire career, see Watkins, Nicholas, Matisse. London: Phaidon, 1993.

Cole, Alison, Eyewitness Art: Color. London: DK, 1993, provides a brief, well-illustrated look at many aspects of color in art.

For a clear graphic explanation of how pigments and color actually function, see Wilcox, Michael, Yellow and Blue Don't Make Green. Cincinnati: North Light Books, 1989.

Gage, John, Color and Culture. Boston: Bullfinch, 1993, is a multi-faceted look at how color has been understood in many cultures, past and present.